Beyond Power and Resistance: New Approaches to Organizational Politics
A Special Issue of *Management Communication Quarterly*

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In this paper we argue that we need to put aside the dichotomy of power and resistance in the study of organizational politics. To make this argument we begin by tracing the evolution of power and resistance in the workplace. Next we argue that changing workplace dynamics mean the two are increasingly intertwined. Finally we then argue that we should consider power and resistance as a singular dynamic we call struggle.

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One of the great historical feats of conventional management theory has been to entrench the view that organizations can be likened to harmonious natural systems (Clegg, *et al*., 2006). Such a picture expects order, functionality and consensus as the default option of the system, as opposed to 'noise', deviance and discord. The history of functionalism and its implicit political assumptions has been well documented, and its resonance can still be felt in contemporary management theories, with neo-institutionalism an obvious recent example. In light of this epistemic backdrop, a major advantage of the growing popularity of critical management studies has been to demonstrate how this 'noise', deviance and resistance is constitutive of organizations, driven as they are by contradictions associated with the management/labour divide, gender inequalities and so-forth. Critical perspectives highlight the importance of power, coercion and domination for maintaining the 'functional' status quo, and thus view organizations as political sites where we might expect opposition, subversion and struggle. And it is the topic of resistance (and the ways we might theorize and study it in contemporary organizations) that is the focus of this special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly*.

The concept of resistance itself has a fascinating scholarly history. While always a staple concern in the classic sociological works of Weber, Marx, Gouldner, Blau among others, the 1970s and 1980s saw it almost entirety relegated to a marginalized 'radical' group of Marxist intellectuals (see Edwards, 1979; Burawoy, 1979). The near extinction of resistance as a dominant analytical term was precipitated by two factors. First, in critical management studies anything even hinting at a Marxist perspective was chastised, especially when the ideas of Michel Foucault became popular for explaining workplace power relations. The key concern here was power and domination through engineered selves, designer selves and crafted selves. In the empirical realities of the world of work too, major transformations were afoot. The large-scale and somewhat brutal restructuring of the corporate infrastructure in Western economies during the 1980s was met by organized union resistance, resulting in sometimes bloody and prolonged confrontation (especially in Britain and France). But with the defeat of the workers movement and the rise of a myopic neo-liberal vision of society and work, it is no wonder bleak Foucauldian themes enjoyed such currency in critical management research.

By the mid 1990s the concept of resistance made a dramatic reappearance. According to commentators like Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) and Collinson (1994), an overdrawn and exaggerated view regarding the efficacy and success of corporate power relations had resulted in a very distorted picture of organizations. According to Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), the mere presence of a corporate 'vision statement' or a culture program was enough for some to conclude that workers were subjectively colonized, stripped of any will-to-oppose. According to Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), however, resistance was always there, be it in the form of organized action or subtle subversions around identity and self, with humour, sexuality and scepticism presented as key examples. Others soon chimed in too, suggesting that if we moved away from the classic Fordist image of resistance that privileges open, overt and organized opposition (e.g., strikes and go slows) then we may be able to see more quotidian variants like cynicism, foot-dragging, dis-identification and alternative articulations of selfhood (see Gabriel, 1999; Fleming and Sewell, 2002, Fleming and Spicer, 2003, Mumby, 2005).

There are obvious advantages of extending the definition of resistance to include everyday engagements with power like cynicism, irony, sexual escapades or even farting. It overcomes the rather narrow view of conflict bequeathed to us by a Marxist tradition that privileged overt and class-based modes of refusal. Just because workers are not directly organizing opposition towards a management initiative does not mean they agree with it. It also underlines how power must be seen in a multidimensional manner, absent of one single sovereign source (i.e., management, capitalism, etc.). However, we feel that such a widening of definitional scope also harbours dangers. Now that even organizational farting or bitching might be legitimately considered resistance, there is a risk of reducing it to the most banal and innocuous everyday actions. Why is this a problem? The tendency is similar to that noted in cultural studies, where the practice of viewing daytime soap operas is now classed as a heinously subversive act. In other words, it romanticizes everyday life, and thus strips the concept of its more striking connotations. With a growing body of research giving all sorts of accounts of workplace resistance, perhaps the scholarly community has moved from seeing resistance nowhere, to seeing it literally everywhere.

Another concern relates to shifting managerial practices that appear to be one step ahead of scholarly analyses of what subversion might mean. We believe that much of what is now being labelled resistance is advocated in the latest management rhetoric and practice. Recent commentators have suggested that cynicism, irony and so-forth actually fits the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) perfectly in that the bleeding-edge software company or consulting firm desires the flexible and innovative cynic more than the conformist 'organizational man' (sic) (also see Ross 2004; Fleming and Sturdy, 2006). Rather than exhort employees to subjectively conform to a unitary set of values *ala* the 1980s cultures of commitment, the latest wave of management gurus invite employees to simply 'be themselves', even if that means being cynically against the values of the firm. In Tom Peter's latest work, for example, he argues that managers should hire the young, imaginative, underground types, who despise managerial hierarchies and authority, display generation Y characteristics and exude subversive authenticity. Indeed, this development reflects broader trends associated with industrializing bohemia and anti-capitalist sentiments among young professional knowledge workers (also see Florida, 2004).

Where does this leave current theories of resistance? Is there a danger that critical management studies has missed the rise of this 'new spirit of capitalism' in which creative destruction, chic slacker-cool and designer resistance are now celebrated in organizations advocating freedom around normative inputs? Are the types of subversions considered 'dangerous' to the capital accumulation process now actually exhorted in managerial discourse (at least in a truncated, designer form)? In light of these developments, we feel that the real question is: what kinds of resistance *could not* be incorporated in these managerial ideas regarding identity at work? This special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* addresses this question among others by attempting to transcend the power/resistance dualism, with each contribution proposing a new vocabulary to capture the politics of work beyond current understandings of resistance.

Beyond Power and Resistance

In order to capture the more complex, confounding and co-opted forms of opposition it is necessary for us to think once again about how we frame the very

notion of resistance. Our current vocabulary of power and resistance is rather limiting given the way it draws a strict contrast between the diabolic world of power and the liberating world of resistance. It sets up a division between a devilish realm of domination where employees are directed by dark-suited overlords and a world of sweetness and light where the emancipated employees frolic in a corporate playground overflowing with opportunities for naughtiness. In this world of stark contrasts managers are thought to be morally deranged creatures who seek to exercise their will-to-dominate at any opportunity. Employees naturally desire even the most minor forms of liberation and endeavour to further their political projects at every turn. However, as the papers demonstrate in this special issue, matters are much more complex, ambiguous and ambivalent. Those in positions of power also resist. For instance, managers may subtly sabotage a corporate initiative (Zald and Berger, 1978). And those who resist need to mobilize power in order to do so (Collinson, 1994). Power and resistance are closely knit together in complex and often contradictory ways. What is more, the culture of the new capitalism has made these ambivalences ever more pronounced. Today, managers are routinely encouraged to break the rules, challenge existing thinking and model themselves on freethinking radicals. Conversely, employees increasingly manage themselves and others in their work-groups. This makes it difficult, if not impossible to tease resistance and power apart.

The closer we look at this relationship the more *dynamic* and co-dependent it becomes. For example, Weber defined power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will *despite resistance*" (Weber, 1978: 53, emphasis added). Here we notice that power is viewed as an attempt to overcome resistance that is already present. Power is viewed as a response to resistance or even a response to the response. The nature of this dynamic was debated in some detail in the 1980's. Hindess (1982) argued, for example, that power should not be seen as the ability of certain agents to overcome a relatively weak actor despite some resistance. Rather, power relations ought to be framed as an ongoing and mutually determined interplay between subordinates and superordinates. Building on this argument, Barbalet (1985) claimed resistance might actually shape these power relations. These approaches suggest that instead of having two diametrically opposed worlds of good and evil, organizations are more like a chiaroscuro of power and resistance whereby 'light' and 'dark' play off each through mixture, contrast and blurring. Indeed, as Mumby (2005) argued more recently, the study of resistance should not focus on "the bow (an ostensible act of obeisance to power) nor the fart (a covert act of resistance to power) but rather on the ways in which these intersect in the moment to produce complex and often contradictory dynamics of control and resistance" (Mumby, 2005: 21).

In order to register these complex and often contradictory dynamics we suggest that the concept of *struggle* might be useful. This term has a deep and diverse history in political theory that stretches from Hobbes to Bourdieu (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). But what is so useful about the concept of struggle for studying organizations is that it provides a term for thinking about power and resistance as an interconnected dynamic. To put this another way, power and resistance are manifestations of a more basic and fundamental process of struggle. This argument is clearly developed by Hannah Arendt (1958) when she claimed that power is the result of flows of communicative interaction within a social body. Similarly, resistance is a manifestation of deep-seated struggles that spring forth from collective, communicative conflicts around certain issues. The social element is important here

since even mundane acts of 'micro-resistance' rely on the same kind of collective communicative interaction. Scott's (1985) study of the various forms of 'infra-politics' (or underground resistance) amongst repressed groups demonstrates how these modes of resistance always flow from communicative networks of which include dominant groups. When these struggles disappear, so too does power and simple tyranny prevails.

In the context of contemporary organizations, we treat struggle as a multi-dimensional dynamic that animates the *interface* between power and resistance. This is a process of ongoing, multiple and unpredictable calls (power) and responses (resistance) in which power and resistance are often indistinguishable. The interface is one of mutual constitution in which power is never without resistance and vice versa. As a social engagement, struggle entails political change, communication and categorization, constitutive self-consciousness and creativity. Studies of the workplace often find various mixtures and connections between different kinds of struggle. For instance, so-called knowledge work may be heavily characterized by struggles around identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). In contrast, certain types of repetitive manufacturing work may be more characterized by struggles around activity (Braverman, 1974), or perhaps even interests (Burawoy, 1979). In some cases, many struggles might be 'stacked' on top of each other resulting in contradictory and unintended outcomes. For instance, struggles over sexual identity and economic interests can confound each. The 'progressive' politics of workers striving to address economic inequality involved a rather 'regressive' identity politics of homophobia (Fleming, 2007). There may be attempts to form strategic links between struggles – this is evident in situations where one group has an advantageous position because they are able to connect a number of struggles in a mutually supporting fashion. The concept of struggle moves us beyond the power/resistance dualism, and allows us to capture more of the ambivalent and ambiguous elements that we find in contemporary organizations.

The Contributions

This special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* explores the complexities and ambivalences involved in organizational struggles. The papers collected here were presented at a special pre-conference workshop held at the North American Academy of Management conference in Atlanta during 2006. Some themes were particularly prominent in the presentations, discussions and debates. First, we may find ourselves at an interesting historical moment where resistance may have a unique quality. In today's post-industrial workplace, employees are encouraged to exhibit themselves, putting more of their 'real' identities into the productive performance. One result is that employees become 'identity entrepreneurs'[2] who seek to incessantly create, embody, promote and ultimately sell new senses of self. In order to craft such beguiling performances, these identity entrepreneurs plunder various forms of sub-cultural resistances as a source of inspiration and value. Workers in this context are increasingly likely to take on an ephemeral attitude to their workplace – viewing it as a 'gig', their 'day job', 'something to pay the rent' or a platform for pursuing other options. As a result, employees are perhaps more likely to simply exit an organization when times get tough. This theme is very well explored in Yiannis Gabriel's perceptive piece. He argues that struggle is staged in organizational 'glass cages' whereby visibility and transparency are of utmost importance. He notes that within this glass cage, organizational members build and promote identities through

exhibitionism. The paper suggests that the advent of the celebrity obsessed consumerization of work has channelled struggle into serial and often dramatic exits.

A second theme that emerged during the workshop focused on the ways in which organizational struggle is extremely pragmatic. People do not engage in struggles to clandestinely advance revolutionary political projects. Instead, they are simply endeavouring to 'get by', involving rather modest goals within very specific and circumscribed fields. This theme is explored very well by Penny Dick in her study of an English constabulary. She examines the ongoing tensions involved in negotiating gender equality. She finds that these rules are often resisted as policemen and women struggle to accumulate and utilize stocks of social and symbolic capital. The result is that even actors who we would expect to be most resistant are often complicit as they struggle to 'get along' in their careers.

Dick's study of the police force reminds us that many struggles fall in between resistance and consent. Her study reminds us that struggles often have multiple purposes and outcomes. This brings us to the third key insight that emerged from the workshop – organizational struggles are often ambivalent in both process and outcomes. This theme is unpacked in Graham Sewell's engagement with theories of resistance. In this piece he sketches a path out of the two well-worn ruts of revived Marxism and neo-Foucauldianism. He argues that we need to be attuned to how resistance often is ambivalent, subversive and complicit in the very same moment. The trope of irony is useful for mapping such ambivalence. Sewell's piece nicely draws our attention to the complexities and dynamics that exist between a world of power and resistance in contemporary organizations. Indeed, it also provides us with a powerful theoretical vocabulary for teasing out the multiple dimensions of struggle in over-determined organizational situations.

The final theme that emerged from the workshop was the importance of considering the experiential and affective dimension of struggle. Too often we try to consider issues of struggle by identifying its causes and the efficacy of its outcomes. Downplayed are the fears and tears of struggle – the emotional drive that frames workplace politics. Indeed, even the most minor acts of resistance might be experienced as radical upheavals in people's emotional life. To properly understand struggle, it is vital to look at its affective components. In an intense encounter with this question, Alessia Contu invites the reader to consider the contributions of psychoanalysis. She argues that we must understand how resistance often serves as the perverse 'underbelly' of organizational life since corporations actually seek to accommodate or even foster various forms of subversion. This leads her to ask whether disruptive struggle is indeed possible in the contemporary corporation. In order to answer this question, we need to consider how people are willing to pay very high emotional prices to speak out against domination. For Contu, the struggle always resides within the irrepressible and emotionally charged antagonisms between us – an antagonism that is amplified in the sphere of work organizations.

Notes

1. We are grateful to Peter Svensson for suggesting this rather beguiling term.

Acknowledgements

The editors of this special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* would like to acknowledge the kind and energetic help of Jim Barker and Richard Badham.

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